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ABSTRACT

Because all human communication, whether among native or non-native speakers, is inherently problematic, ambiguous, and subject to negotiation, learners of a second language should be taught to cope with ambiguity, approximations, hypotheses, and guesses rather than be pushed to find the "right answer." Much of the instructional material presented in second language courses for development of comprehension is inappropriate. Language teaching materials should expose learners to carefully-selected authentic data as soon as possible, to assist them in developing strategies for dealing with difficult language. Such authentic materials should follow the grammatical, phonological, orthographic, social, cultural, discourse, and pragmatic conventions of the target language. Examples of authentic texts are offered, each of which contains important pragmatic, cultural, discourse, or semantic features for language learning, and each accompanied by a number of suggested discussion questions. Contains 35 references. (MSE)

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Pragmatics and TESOL: using authentic language data

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Introduction

Despite the current emphasis on communicative approaches to language teaching, there remains a great deal of debate about what communicative approaches consist of, and what communicative language teaching materials are like. At the same time, experienced teachers of English report the apparent paradox that even advanced learners of English in a complex multicultural society such as Australia's may unwittingly cause offence, be misunderstood, fail to understand jokes or sarcasm, find it difficult to find employment, or be injured in the workplace, despite their accuracy in pronunciation and their knowledge of English grammar. Why might this be so?

Before responding directly to the question I have raised, I would like to consider the following extract taken from a "communicative" English program in Indonesia:

> Tati: Good morning, Sir
>
> Abidin: Good morning. Have a seat, please. What can I do for you?
>
> Tati: You asked me to come for an interview, Sir.
>
> Abidin: Oh yes. Are you Tati Candra?
>
> Tati: Yes, I am.
>
> Abidin: Well, I need a secretary. Can you write business letters in English?
>
> Tati: Yes, I can.
>
> Abidin: What about French?
>
> Tati: I am sorry, sir, I can't. I don't speak French.
>
> Abidin: It doesn't matter. Now write a letter to a company asking for the prices of these articles. Let me see if you can do it satisfactorily.
>
> (Government-supplied text book for students in Year 1, semester 2 1988:9)

I have attended many job interviews in my career, both as applicant and as selection committee member, and I have never experienced one which was conducted in this way. Indeed, if I were to be offered a job after an interview such as this I would turn it down. There is nothing wrong with this in terms of spelling or syntax, but from many other points of view - as I hope you will agree - this "dialogue" is distinctly odd and unnatural, and does not appear to follow what most native speakers would consider to be the norms of a job interview. I believe that it is clear that this "dialogue" is included not as an example of a job interview, but rather as an illustration of a particular grammatical structure. The participants in this dialogue appear to be excellent examples of what Widdowson (1984:69) refers to as

> "stereotypic dummies, humanoids mouthing sentence patterns."

It appears that the Indonesian materials are not alone, and many language courses do not provide natural appropriate models for learners. As Williams (1988) has shown for ESP materials, the language taught by "Business English" textbooks for use in meetings differs markedly from the language actually used in business meetings by native speakers of English. Scotton and Bernstein (1988) studied native speakers of English giving directions, and these researchers show that natural conversations are far more complex and variable across situations than textbook dialogues suggest.

I believe that there are other problems with many current language teaching materials and courses, which claim to be "communicative", which I shall reduce to the following points for space reasons:

* Despite the work of Krashen and others on "comprehensible input", many language courses still appear to emphasise productive rather than receptive skills

* Many language courses assume that meaning is inherent in words , structures, sentences, paragraphs etc

* Many so-called "communicative" materials are in fact structurally-based materials in a different package and the dialogues and reading passages in many "communicative" courses are designed to introduce a grammatical structure rather than to present authentic examples of the target language.

If all this is true, what has the study of pragmatics to offer us, and what insights can we glean for language teaching materials? Before turning to this question it is necessary to discuss what is meant by the term "pragmatics".

2. What is pragmatics and why is it important?

Leech (1983) is perhaps the best-known writer on pragmatics, and he distinguishes between "general pragmatics" or the study of the general conditions of the communicative use of language and "pragmalinguistics", or the study of the particular resources which a given language provides for conveying particular speech acts. In more general terms, Leech describes pragmatics as "how language is used in communication" (1983:1) or " the principles of language use" (1983:4). Fraser describes pragmatics in the following terms:

> "the relationship between what is said in communication...and what is done in communication." (Fraser, 1983)

Yule (1985) sees pragmatics as the study of "intended speaker-meaning."

I have found it useful in discussions with teachers of ESL/EFL to ask them to think of pragmatics as the study of what is meant in communication as distinct from what is said or written.

The study of pragmatics has been heavily influenced by the work of philosophers of language such as the work by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) on speech acts and Grice's work on the Cooperative Principle

(1975). I do not have the space here to go into the question of whether speech acts and the Cooperative Principle are universal, or whether they are bound to particular languages and cultures. The fact remains that the work of these writers has been influential, and in recent times there has been an increase in the degree of interest in the field of pragmatics, although the work has been slow to impinge on the work of language teachers. Some of the recent work in pragmatics includes the following partial listing:

Bardovi-Harlig and her colleagues (1990, 1991)
Beal (1990,1992)
Blum-Kulka (1991)
Kasper and Dahl (1991)
Wierzbicka (1985,1990)

One of the difficulties inherent in introducing the study of pragmatics is that there is an unknown number of speech acts, and it is impossible to predict all the possible contexts in which our students may need to interact. However, As Bardovi-Harlig et al point out (1991:5), while we cannot prepare our students for every language context , purpose, or speech act, we can develop the learners' awareness of the pragmatic functions of language, and assist them to develop strategies for the comprehension of language in a range of different contexts. As Leech states (1983:1),

> "we cannot really understand the nature of language itself unless we understand pragmatics".

To this I would add that we cannot really understand the task we face as teachers of English unless we understand pragmatics and its implications for the ESL/EFL classroom.

With these preliminary comments I now propose to turn to an examination of ways in which the notion of pragmatics can be introduced to teachers of ESL/EFL, and their students. My basic argument is that the notion of pragmatics can best be introduced through the examination and analysis of carefully-chosen extracts of authentic samples of language in use. If we introduce the notion of pragmatics in this way, we can assist students to develop their own strategies for comprehension and communication in contexts outside the classroom, and this is consistent with current work on learner strategies and learner autonomy (cf O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Mendelsohn, 1994). Consider for example the following exchange, and the questions which follow:

Text 1:

A. So can you come over here again right now.

B. Well, I have to go to Edinburgh today, Sir.

A. Hmmm. How about this Thursday?

(Levinson, 1983:48-49)

Given a text such as this, groups can be set to work to discuss questions of the following type which require the reader to "get under the skin" of what is being said. This requires the activation of the "interpretive mechanisms" in the heads of the discussants, and requires them to make explicit the reasons why they can deduce information about participants, the setting, the relationship between the participants and so on, and the cues they use in making these deductions:

Possible discussion questions:

* In what context does this exchange occur?

* By what means are A and B communicating?

* Where are A and B? (Be as exact as you can!)

*What is the day on which this exchange takes place?

*What do you know about the sex and status of A and B?

* Describe the relationship between A and B.

* What help do the dictionary or grammar book entries for "so", "well", and "hmmm" give you in understanding how these words function in this context?

The last question has been very useful in leading students to see that a reliance on the dictionary or grammar book may not help in interpreting language in context, and many non-native speakers have expressed surprise that so much meaning can be carried by "words" which do not even appear in their trusted reference books.

An examination of authentic texts can also reveal important features of the culture of the second language, as the following example collected by one of the former students of our Graduate Diploma of TESOL indicates:

Text 2

Coming tomorrow ?

Yes. Ladies bring a plate isn't it ?

That's right.

I'll do a pav. What about you ?

Sponge I think.

Should be a good turn up.

Yes , they'll all be back after the break.

(McKnight, 1994:23)

In cases such as this, the interpretation may be quite demanding of students, and it needs to be made clear that many of the meanings which can be drawn from such texts are based on inferences rather than "facts". Useful questions for a passage such as this may be of the following type:

* How many participants are there? How do you know?

* What sex are the participants? How do you know?

* What is the nature of their relationship? How do you know?

* Where does the exchange take place? How do you know?

* What do you understand by the following vocabulary items: "pav", "sponge" , "turn up", "break" ?

Through a discussion of the answers to discussion questions such as these, students may be brought to an understanding that the rules of conversations in English may differ from their L1 rules; that there may be sex differences in topics chosen, lexis etc.; that context has a major influence on language and understanding; that people do not speak like grammar books or dictionaries; and that there may be regional, social, cultural , and even age differences in language use, even among native speakers.

It may be argued that the examination of extracts such as the foregoing presuppose a high degree of competence in the second language, and a high degree of sophistication in the interpretation of language. On the latter point, I would argue that second language learners - by definition - have a sophisticated knowledge of what language does and how it may be used, derived from their intuitive knowledge of their L1. However, this knowledge is often disregarded in our language classrooms and the materials we use. On the former point, I would argue that students can begin to analyse language in use at a very early stage in the learning of the second language, and that the discussion of the samples can be carried out productively in the students' L1. Consider , for example, the following text and the discussion questions which follow:

Text 3:

A. Hello.

B. Hello.

A. Oh hi !

Possible discussion questions for this text might be the following:

* By what means are A and B communicating?

* In what context are A and B communicating?

* What do you know about the relationship between A and B?

* How might this exchange occur in your language?

It is clear that this text would present interesting problems of interpretation, and at early stages of second language learning the discussion questions and the discussion itself would need to be in the L1, but it would not be likely to cause any problems because of its grammar or lexis.

As I stated in the Introduction, even at an advanced level learners may have real difficulty with interpreting language which presumes knowledge of geographical and historical references, and humour and sarcasm are notoriously difficult for second language learners. At advanced levels extracts which present a real challenge for interpretation may be used. The following is one such example which presents difficulties even for native speakers:

Text 4:

Saw Mrs Smith in Myers.

Buying a pith helmet?

They didn't have fetta.

Where's the soap then?

I think he's all right really.

House is far too big.

(McKnight, 1994:24)

For this text, the following discussion starters may be useful:

* How many participants are there in this exchange?

* What is their relationship?

* What else can you infer about them? (eg Where do they live? How old are they?)

* Where does the exchange take place? (Be as exact as you can!)

* In what context does this exchange take place?

* What is a pith helmet? What does it mean in this context?

* What is fetta?

* What is soap? What is meant by "soap" in this context?

* To whom does "they" (line 3) refer?

* To whom does "he" refer (line 5)?

* What does the word "then" mean (line 4)?

* What can you say about the language used by the interactants?

* What insights into Australian culture (if any) can you gain from this passage?

This text can be discussed initially using only the written text. After the discussion groups have developed some hypotheses about the discussion questions, a tape of the interaction can be played, and the groups asked to continue discussion. This leads to an awareness of the importance of auditory cues to interpretation of language in context. As a third step, a video-tape could be shown, and the discussion groups can be led to understand how cues provided by the visual form can assist with interpretation.

Discussion of this text in our classes for teachers of ESL/EFL has been valuable because it has been clear to the non-native speakers in the group that interpretation of such texts presents a challenge even for native speakers, and this helps to reinforce the point that meaning is something which has to be worked on.

As learners develop in their competence in the L2, they can be asked to collect samples of authentic language which have puzzled or interested them. The following examples indicate the range of types of authentic language which can be collected by students and discussed by them, with the "collector" providing any necessary answers to questions from the group about the context in which the text was collected:

Text 5:

> Sorry, I didn't go before I went and I still haven't been.
> (McKnight, 1994: 24)

For this short text I have found the following types of questions useful:

Possible discussion questions:

* Why does the speaker begin with "sorry"?

* To what actions do the verbs "go" , "went" and "haven't been" refer?

* What is the sex of the speaker?

* What is the relationship between speaker and listeners?

One which has been more challenging for both native and non-native speakers has been the following:

Text 6:

> He seemed to resent them on that occasion and will not wear them today.
> (McKnight, 1994: 24)

Possible discussion questions for this text might be as follows:

* What can be both resented and worn?

* How do you interpret "he" and "them" ?

* Where might you find similar language?

For some of our international students some aspects of Australian culture are initially quite puzzling, and the following text is one which has created some interesting discussion:

Text 7:

MAGPIES
MAUL
HAWKS

(McKnight, 1994: 25)

Possible discussion questions for this text might include the following:

* What are "magpies" and "hawks"?

* Why is the word "maul" used?

* Where might you expect to find language similar to this?

* What clues does the presentation of this text provide?

Some texts can indicate just how unrealistic many of the scripted dialogues which appear in ESL materials are. Consider for example the following text:

Text 8:

A. Have you got Teacher's scotch?

B. Are you eighteen?

A. No.

B. No.

(McKnight, 1994: 26)

Possible questions relating to this text might include the following:

* Where might this exchange have taken place?

* Why does B ask A's age?

* What does B's "No" really mean?

* What cultural knowledge is required to interpret this text?

Following a discussion of this type of text, students can often enjoy rewriting scripted dialogues from their course materials to make them sound more natural. This task in itself generates much useful discussion in our TESOL classes about the norms of the language being studied, to the benefit of both Australian and international colleagues.

8. Conclusion

It has become a cliché that "communication is a two-way process" but many of our language teaching materials do not give this impression. Similarly, the emphasis on production of target language forms is necessary, but not at the expense of receptive skills, which have tended in the past to be relatively neglected.

All human communication is inherently problematic, ambiguous, and subject to negotiation, whether we are thinking of L1 speakers , L2 speakers, or the increasingly common interactions between L1 and L2 speakers, and speakers from different L1s using the L2 as a "lingua franca". We need to encourage our students to see that meaning is not inherent in words, sentences or utterances, but jointly constructed by speakers/listeners and readers/ writers. Because of the problematic nature of much communication between people, including native speakers, effective communication requires interpretive "work" on the part of all parties to the interaction.

Following from this point, learners need to be encouraged to work with ambiguity, approximations, hypotheses, and guesses, rather than be pushed to find "the right answer". For this reason, much of the material presented in language courses as comprehension exercises is inappropriate.

Language teaching materials should expose learners to carefully-selected authentic data as soon as possible, and assist learners to develop strategies for dealing with language which may at first sight or hearing seem impenetrable to them .

If learners of English are to have a chance of becoming communicatively competent, they must be exposed to authentic language samples which follow the conventions of the target language. These conventions include grammatical, phonological, orthographic, social, cultural, discoursal and pragmatic. As I have shown above, material presented in language teaching courses may well meet the grammatical, phonological and orthographic conventions of the target language, but much may not meet other equally important conventions.

We have moved far from the behaviourist paradigm which saw language as a set of habits and language learning as the inculcation of those habits, but we do not appear to have developed a more suitable metaphor for second language learning. I see second language learning as a massive problem-solving process rather akin to the completion of one of those large jig-saw puzzles which consists of large areas of sea and sky, without the benefit of the lid of the box as a guide. If we can help our learners to find the corner pieces and the edges of the puzzle, we have not done the puzzle for them, but we have given them useful strategies to use in attempting to complete it.

In my view, the task of the language teacher is to design classroom activities which promote pragmatic awareness, raise students' consciousness of language in all its complexity, and encourage students to develop their own strategies of communication and learning. These aims can be met only if we use carefully-selected authentic language data, in conjunction with group work, and problem-solving activities. The development of computer corpora such as the COBUILD means that we can now have access to a wide range of authentic language data based on spoken as well as written English, which can be used as the basis for the development of more appropriate materials (cf Lewis, 1993). Problem-solving tasks based on authentic data, such as those outlined above, are consistent with the current emphasis on task-based, learner-centred language teaching, and fit well into the communicative classroom. I hope I have shown that the selective use of authentic data can be used effectively to introduce pragmatics and develop an understanding of it.

As Swan (1985:85) expresses the problem

> "If students are exposed only to scripted material, they will learn an impoverished form of the language, and will find it hard to come to terms with genuine discourse when they are exposed to it."

I believe that the widespread use of inauthentic scripted material in our language teaching materials has been one cause of some of the difficulties experienced by advanced learners when exposed to authentic interactions with native speakers, and we can do a much better job of preparing our students for the range of contexts in which they will require the second language. Language teachers should "stop explaining" to their students, and "start exploring" with their students (cf Lewis, 1986). This entails a fundamental change in the teacher-learner relationship which is ultimately of far more significance than the adoption of any particular approach to curriculum and syllabus design.

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